



# The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain

Lewis Spence

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## **Preface**

For the greater part of a lifetime I have awaited the appearance of a work especially devoted to the consideration of the occult arts as they were practised among the Celtic peoples of Britain. Essays, articles and other fugitive contributions to our knowledge of Celtic arcana have appeared in considerable profusion from time to time, but no volume as yet purports to examine in its entirety the whole range of British-Celtic Magic. Here, I may say parenthetically, I employ the term "Magic" as

usefully describing in a more or less comprehensive manner all the occult arts, and even Mysticism itself, which has, I believe, intimate associations with it, in the historic sense at least.

Having long awaited such a book, and beholding no signs of its appearance, I at last resolved upon the somewhat desperate expedient of writing it myself. I realize that to some extent my claims to authoritative knowledge in certain sections of Celtic lore might not pass muster among Celtic purists. My acquaintance with the Celtic tongues is confined to a considerable vocabulary of its modern dialects alone. But I happen to be a Celt, I can lay claim to a fair share of the Celtic temperament, and I can truthfully aver that my knowledge of Magic in all its forms has more than half a century of research to recommend it. I have with care, and I hope with understanding, perused practically every page which has been written on the subject of Celtic belief, as it was known to these islands, which is now available in print. In short, in writing this book I have been actuated by a desire to provide my readers with the kind of volume which I had always hoped might eventually appear from more competent hands. I have set down nothing in these pages without the sanction of superiority, and if their record is not a flawless one, it is, I believe, free from anything in the shape of gross misdirection and careless statement.

But I have by no means slavishly followed the explanatory declarations of my superiors in Celtic lore. Indeed, in more instances than one I have ventured to differ sharply from their conclusions. Quite a number of Celtic scholars are by no means well versed in Anthropological science and in folk-lore, and where I have considered them inaccurate in these respects I have said so plainly and have ventured upon elucidations which have seemed to me more in keeping with the canons and spirit of these twin sciences.

Perhaps this book might have been entitled *The Idea of the Supernatural Among the British Celts*. In that case, however, it would have been necessary to include a description of that vast mass of common superstitions which are generally believed to have had their origin in the Celtic mentality, that flotsam and jetsam of popular lore which is to be encountered over the length and breadth of these islands—warnings, minor domestic superstitions, proverbial sayings and rhymes—in short, the minutiae of popular credence. But the majority of such beliefs and customs cannot appropriately, in my view, be associated entirely with Celtic belief, appearing as they do to have their source in the great storehouse of a common European body of superstition. Even so, I have included many such beliefs in these pages for the sake of completeness. Moreover, the caption to which I allude would have made essential some more or less exhaustive account of Celtic mythology and rite, which would have carried me far out of the course I had set for myself.

Nor will the reader find much in these pages concerning witchcraft proper, which was in no sense a system of Celtic provenance alone, and which, as practised in Celtic communities, reveals very much the same features as it did elsewhere. Only here and there, too, in such places as comparison has seemed to make it necessary, have I alluded to the Magic of ancient Gaul, a more exhaustive description of that allied, though in some respects sharply dissimilar, system demanding a demonstration much too extended for the space at my disposal. The whole intention, in brief, has been to supply a readable and accurate account of the Magic arts as found among the Celts of the British Isles which might be comprehensible to the wayfaring reader.

I have thought it well to include a fairly comprehensive statement concerning the Mysticism of the British-Celtic races, without which such a book could scarcely have fulfilled its legitimate intention. In venturing upon several novel and strictly personal theories respecting the origins of Druidism, and its associations with the cult of the Divine King, the British belief in Reincarnation, the cultus of Arthur, the mystery of the Grail and the problem of Second Sight, I have, though respecting the views of genuine authorities, adhered more particularly to my own individual conclusions, some of which, it will be seen, are entirely at variance with those of other writers, and reflect the results of long and careful consideration. If they are erroneous, legitimate criticism will doubtless make plain where I have stumbled and I shall be the first to accept the discipline of its strictures. At the same time I would plead that the framing of a first essay on the vexed subject of Magic as known to the insular Celts is a most onerous and complicated task—one, indeed, in the course of which it is scarcely to be expected that errors more or less salient will not obtrude themselves.

I should add that what I have written concerning modern Welsh criticism is set down in no spirit of cavil, but in the hope that the truly extraordinary achievements it has made will be still more widely appreciated and that its efforts will be released from a certain diffidence of attitude and a vein of apology which, it seems to me, is inappropriate to a scholarship so able and so distinguished.

L. S.

## CHAPTER I THE MAGIC ART AMONG THE CELTS

The tradition of the arcane and the mysterious cleaves to certain races so naturally as to make it seem an inherent and inalienable possession. The Magic of Arabia, the secret doctrines of India and the runic mysteries of Scandinavia are salient expressions of racial affinity with the mystical and the marvellous. But to no race, I maintain, was it given to cultivate a higher or keener sense of spiritual vision or of the fantastically remote than to the Celtic. It has indeed justified the claim by the production of a literature which casts back to the seventh and eighth centuries of our era, and is unsurpassed in fantasy and weirdly delicate invention. Later Celtic popular stories and folktales reflect and continue this distinction in the primitive yet brilliant simplicity and remote strangeness of their subject-matter and narrative quality. And as if unexhausted by the conception in its Irish sphere of a series of sagas unmatched for magical charm among the world's mythologies, the Celtic tradition addressed itself in its later heyday in the island of Britain to the transformation of these older materials into a body of romance which, because of its noble excellence, its amazement of marvel and incident and its almost divine sentiment of chivalry, made every land in Europe its spiritual tributary. To the Celtic sense of wonder and the generous ideals which accompanied it as expressed in the Arthurian epic, the folk of the Empire of Britain, both in these islands and in the Britains oversea, are vastly more indebted than even the wisest among us suspects. To the great lessons it inculcates we can trace our national enthusiasm for the qualities of freedom, mercy, chivalry, fair play— all those virtues which, I dare to say, still in great measure distinguish us from the rest of mankind, and which, in the sight of the whole world, have made this island a refuge for the oppressed and the unprotected in days of darkness.

It is not necessary that I should trace in these pages the pre-history or the later progress of the Celtic race as situated in its regions of settlement— in Britain, in Ireland, in Gaul or in the Lesser Britain of Armorica or Brittany. That has been done so frequently and with such acceptance by a cloud of gifted witnesses as to render further demonstration of it needless and supererogatory. In these pages it is the Magic and Mysticism of the Celtic race, its arcane and occult practice and ideality, I wish to describe. The subject is indeed one which, although copiously treated, has not so far been separately and particularly examined in a work especially devoted to its consideration. That I shall succeed in my endeavour to present a satisfactory account of a theme so vast and complicated is a hope beyond my expectation, but I may, through long acquaintance with its subject-matter, be enabled to supply an acceptable account of its more outstanding principles.

The writers of antiquity were at one in realizing the native superiority of the Celtic mind in the science of Magic. Pliny remarks that the Britain of his day (the first among the new centuries) "celebrates them with such ceremonies that it might seem possible that she taught Magic to the Persians". Diodorus Siculus, Timagenes, Hippolytus and Clement of Alexandria were unanimous in believing that Pythagoras had received his mystical philosophy from the Celtic priests of Gaul, rather than they from him. Valerius Maximus, in the Second Book of his "Stromata", issues a warning that if one should jeer at the notions of the Druids respecting immortality, he must also laugh at those of Pythagoras. The ancient world was assuredly almost as deeply impressed by the doctrines and mysteries of ancient Britain as it was by those of Egypt or Chaldea.

That a very complete system of Magic, associated with a definite body of mystical dogma and arcane



thought, was practised by the Magi of ancient Britain and Ireland is apparent from trustworthy evidence. In the pages that follow it will be my endeavour to make more clear than has yet been done the type of arcane belief to which it actually belonged. It is important that we should seek to estimate its more precise status among the magical systems of the world; that we should realize wherein, if at all, it differed from other similar systems; that, in short, we should be enabled to state conclusively what were its salient characteristics and qualities. It has been said that in no sense does it differ from other Aryan bodies of occult belief. It has even been urged that it cannot be distinguished from the Magic of the primitive medicine-man or witch-doctor of savage races. If this be so, the evidence will either substantiate such a theory or will dispose of it entirely, although it must be added that any just consideration of its more profoundly philosophic mysticism totally overthrows the notion that its practitioners were merely a body of crude and unlettered aboriginal jugglers—and indeed the accounts of Julius Caesar, Pliny, Strabo and Cicero, among others, reveal the falsity of such a view.

Before proceeding farther I must explain what I imply by the term "Magic", an expression which certainly has different meanings for different authorities, from some of whom we may seek for guidance. Tylor, the initiator of the modern school of Anthropology, defined Magic as "occult science", and subdivided it into the "spiritistic" and the "natural"; that is, he believed certain kinds of Magic were wrought by the aid of spiritual entities, while others were induced by "sympathetic Magic"—that species of sorcery which believes that like causes bring about like results through the employment of mimetic or theatric action, or ritual.

But Magic is now held by many authorities to proceed from what is known as *Mana*, a Melanesian word which expresses a mysterious energy or essence issuing from a reservoir of arcane power. This magical essence is thought of by some savage peoples as pervading the whole world, and if the magician can attract a sufficiency of it he can employ it for his mystical purposes. It seems not improbable that the belief in spirits may have been developed from this belief at a later period—that is, *Mana* came to be "personified" in spirit-form, to take on the shape of individual spirits.

But types of Magic exist which, in my opinion, fall under the heads of neither of Tylor's categories, nor of that of *Mana*. I cannot, for instance, explain such obviously magical acts as the transformation of men into shapes other than their own, human or animal, or the changing of a landscape by Illusion, as being due either to the influence of spirits or to mere sympathetic Magic. Some other factor, acquired or separately developed, appears to enter into the tradition of Magic in such cases. Here we have a belief associated with an innate potency in humanity unguessed or ignored by the modern anthropologist. Yet it was recognized by the Arab sage Avicenna, who long ago gave it as his belief that there exists in the human mind a certain power of altering objects, and that such objects obey that power when the sorcerer is inspired by a sense of extreme supernatural might. Paracelsus also believed that "all the wonders of Magic are performed by will, imagination and faith", and such must unquestionably have been the attitude of the Egyptian and Babylonian magicians when they supplicated the gods to grant them power to engage in magical acts. It is this third phase of Magic, then, by which we must seek to account for such instances as appear to be outside its other two categories, that is if we desire to understand the primitive idea of arcane practice in its entirety.

It is necessary to say at once that such records as we have of Celtic Magic in the region which is now known as England furnish us with only scanty clues to the magical ideas or practices of the Celtic race. For such information it is necessary to appeal mainly to the literatures and traditions of Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Certain parts of these records are acceptable as being of the nature of genuine chronicle and folk-tradition, and are not easily disposed of. In the lands alluded to we find the mysterious caste of the Druids wielding powers of illusion, raising winds and tempests, casting mists over the landscape for the confusion of their enemies or for reasons of defence. They are masters of the arts of shape-shifting and bodily transformations, they are capable of vision at a distance. We find them united in magical colleges for the instruction and furtherance of arcane knowledge. By a draught of mysterious elixir they can induce forgetfulness. They can dry up watercourses and employ their sorcery on behalf of their native rulers in battle. They engage in magical contests with Christian saints and missionaries. They can annihilate time through prophecy and the divination of omens. An understanding of the language of the



animal world is vouchsafed them. Indeed, there is no department of the magical art in which, apparently, they are not versed.

An account of the great contest of St. Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, with the Irish Druids, as set forth in his Tripartite Life, well exemplifies the contemporary belief in those magical potencies which the Druidic brotherhood were said to be able to wield, and to a certain extent summarizes them. On the eve of *Bealltainn*, when the great bonfire of the god Beli was lit, a fire was seen to be burning in the direction of Tara, the Irish religious capital. This was irregular, as only by the hands of the Chief Druid could such a fire be kindled at that festival. In some dismay the Archdruid proceeded to the spot where the blaze appeared, and in angry surprise discovered St. Patrick and his followers chanting their psalms round a camp-fire. The Druid ordered the offending Saint to accompany him to the Assembly at Tara, where he eloquently defended his mission of salvation before the King, with arguments so damaging to the Druidic faith that the wrathful pontiff challenged him to work a miracle which would justify those powers he claimed on behalf of his divine Master. The Saint refused to disturb the order of Providence to gratify mere curiosity, whereupon the pagan priest, to display his occult powers, chanting spells and brandishing his wand, plunged the landscape in a heavy snowfall. This illusion Patrick dispersed by simply making the sign of the Cross, on which the Druid, not to be defeated, caused a thick darkness to fall upon the countryside. But the Saint, resorting to prayer, dissolved the gloomy cloud.

The King, anxious for further proofs of the relative powers of the rival priests, commanded each of them to cast his book into the water, so that he in whose volume the letters remained uninjured might be declared the minister of truth. To this the Druid would not consent, and he further refused a similar trial by fire. The King then ordered each of the rivals to enter a tent filled with dry boughs which would be set alight. "Nay," said the Saint, willing to display the superiority of his divine Magic, "let one be filled with green branches, and this I resign to my opponent." St. Benin, who accompanied Patrick, besought his leave to enter the tent of dry boughs, and did so, bearing the Druid's mantle, while the Druid, carrying his, as fearlessly entered the tent of green twigs full of sap. Both huts were fired at the same moment, and in the twinkling of an eye the shelter of green boughs, containing the Druid, was reduced to ashes with all that it held, save the young saint's mantle. In the other nothing was consumed except the Druid's cloak.

If we seek among the Celtic languages for expressions relative to the Magic Arts we find that the noun employed to describe the spoken word of Magic, or the spell, among the Gaelic speaking Celts of ancient Scotland and Ireland was *Bricht*, which has been equated with the Icelandic *bragr*, "poetry", that is "magical rhyme". <sup>1</sup> A term commonly in use among the Gaels to denote any magical act, or sleight of sorcery, is *Druidheachd*, which only too readily reveals the actual source of its inspiration. <sup>2</sup> The word *Eolas*, "knowledge", is also frequently still in use as signifying magical potency in the more popular and general sense of the term.

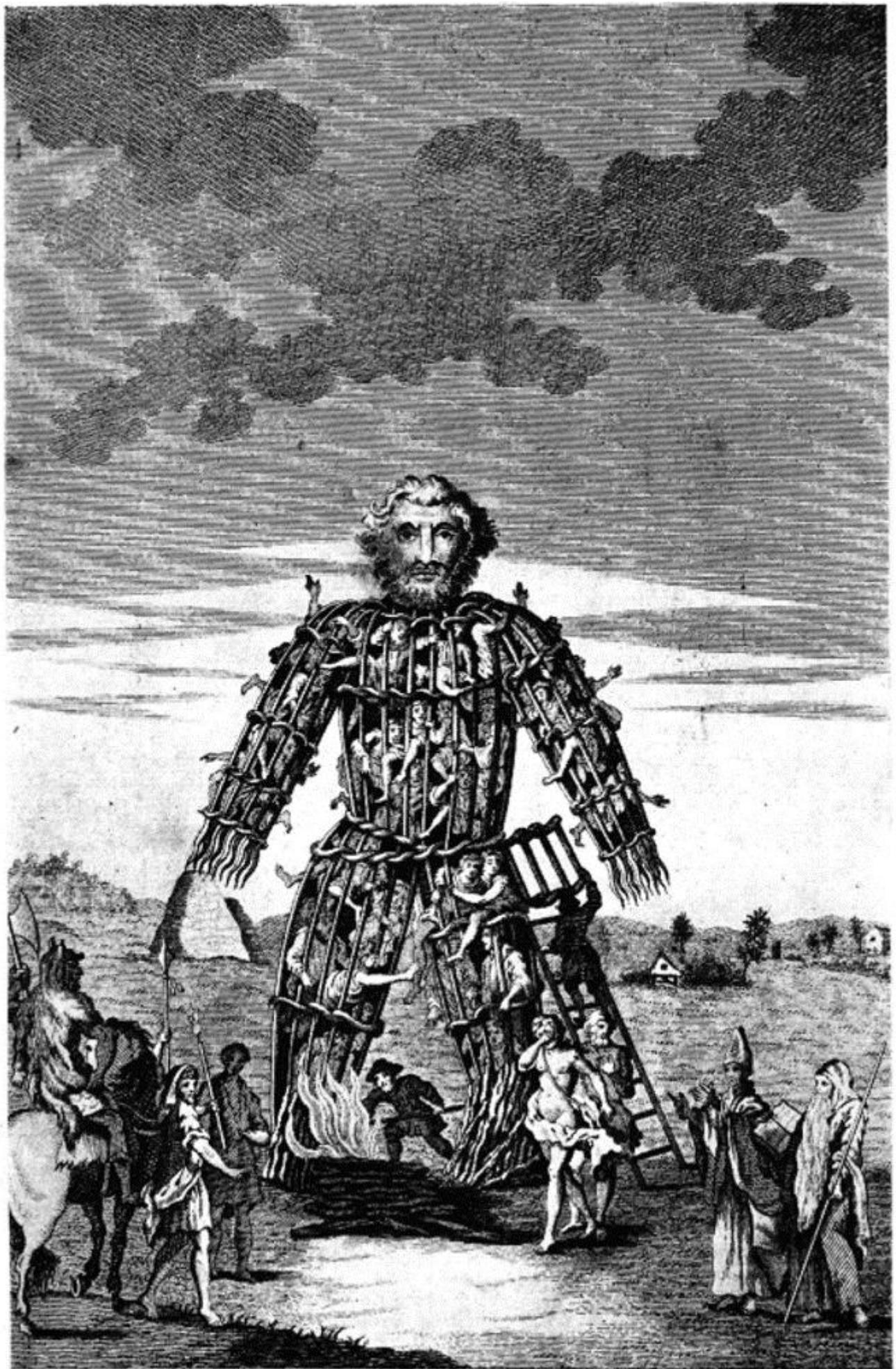
If we look for examples of the type of sorcery implied by the word "Druidry" we shall most easily discern them in the records of Irish Druidism. To induce confusion, or to conceal themselves, the Druids were in the habit of casting dense fogs over a landscape. To cover their approach from the sea, such a method was employed by the leaders of the Tuatha Dé Danann, or Children of the Goddess Danu, an early race of Celtic magicians, when they first invaded Ireland. These immigrant sorcerers spread "druidically formed showers and fog sustaining shower-clouds" over the countryside, causing the heavens to rain down fire and blood upon its defenders, the native aboriginal race of the Fir-Bolgs. But the Fir-Bolgs had Druids of their own, whose counter-enchancements put a period to the disastrous exhalations. <sup>3</sup> Another instance of this species of smoke-screen is to be found in the tale of Cormac, who, seeking for his wife Eithne and his children, kidnapped by Manannan, the god of the sea, passed through "a dark magical mist" in the course of his successful efforts to discover them.

The raising of artificial windstorms was also a prominent feature of Druidical sorcery. When the Tuatha Dé Danann, in their turn, hopelessly endeavoured to repel the onset of the Milesians, the last of the Hibernian races to seek settlement upon the soil of Ireland, they sent a "druidical" tempest against the invaders, which made it impossible for them to reach the shore. Donn, one of the Milesian leaders, discovered that the atmosphere was quite unruffled above his galley, and realizing that the storm was

magically induced, invoked "the power of the land of Erin" against its violence, whereupon it subsided. But the Danann sea-god, Manannan, shook his magic mantle in the direction of the Milesians and a fresh tempest wrecked some of their craft before they succeeded in making a landing. <sup>4</sup>

Inspired by all the hate of Celtic feud, the Druid Mog Ruath of Munster, when he opposed King Cormac and his Druids, drove them by his magic fire and storm-spells from that kingdom. We learn, too, that the Druids of King Loegaire sadly persecuted the early Christian missionaries by sending heavy snowfalls and thick darkness upon them. <sup>5</sup> Broichan, the Druid of King Brude, a Pictish monarch who ruled over a part of Scotland, caused so dire a storm and such fell darkness to descend upon Loch Ness that St. Columba found navigation upon its waters impossible for a time. <sup>6</sup> The god Lugh bore off Conn of the Hundred Battles in a magic mist to an enchanted palace, where he prophesied to him concerning the fortunes of his royal descendants. <sup>7</sup> The tales regarding such magical interference with the elements are so numerous as to make possible reference to the most typical only.

Shape-shifting and the transformation of persons into forms other than their own are equally the common themes of Celtic magical story. It is necessary to discriminate between these forms of enchantment.



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